DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 653 SO 016 350

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TITLE Holistic Perspectives on Education: A Proposed Course for Educators.
PUB DATE 9 Nov 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (San Francisco, CA, November 4-9, 1985). For related document, see SO 016 349.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Descriptions; *Educational Change; Educational Needs; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Holistic Approach; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Teacher Education; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a seminar designed to provide educators with a conceptual basis for holistic education. The implementation of holistic methods depends on the ability of classroom teachers to make use of the literature on the topic. This course begins by studying the works of physicists who have taken a holistic approach to science and whose ideas are applicable to education. It also identifies and examines holistic perspectives from thinkers in other disciplines and considers the assumptions on which they are based. It is interdisciplinary and philosophical, but also designed for practical application. Although some educators might consider this course utopian or naive, and therefore never able to be systematically taught on a large scale, they must begin to think and to act comprehensively regarding educational planning. (IS)

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# HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION:

## A Proposed Course for Educators

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presented to the

American Educational Studies Association
San Francisco, California
November 9, 1984

SP 016 350

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# HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION:

## A Proposed Course for Educators

### I

Kōun Yamada, in his preface to Gateless Gate in 1979 wrote "It is no exaggeration to say that Zen is on the verge of completely dying out here in Japan."[1] John Blofeld, renowned authority and writer on Taoism and Buddhism, presented a similar picture when he wrote of his "fear that Taoism may be on the point of vanishing from the earth."[2]

These statements notwithstanding, many of the concepts associated with "holistic education" here in the West are enduring concepts of wholeness associated with Zen, Taoism, and other traditionally Eastern systems. Whereas the theoretical background to the course presented in this paper relies on examples taken from modern and distinctly Western and secular domains of knowledge, holistic concepts of both physical and psychological "wellness"—in addition to being found in ancient Western aboriginal cultures[3]—are found in Eastern traditions nearly 5000 years old.[4] Some, of course, believe such cultures and traditions to be considerably older.[5]

This paper introduces and outlines a proposal for a seminar designed to provide educators with a conceptual basis for holistic education. It is the second paper in a series on this subject. (The first of these—"Towards a Holistic Paradigm for Education: A Communications Approach"—establishes a conceptual basis for holistic education, communicates my perception of the need for educators to learn about it, and outlines some basic criteria for a holistic paradigm for education.)[6]

This proposed course makes three assumptions: 1) that a holistic paradigm for education is both necessary and desirable (the subject matter and orientation of the first paper in this series), 2) that some excellent holistic and world-minded curriculum materials already exist (see Bibliography for some examples), and 3) that, given the existence of such materials, their optimum usefulness depends upon the underlying attitude and conceptual base of the classroom teacher.

The seminar described in this paper attempts to fulfill this third assumption: a general curriculum is proposed for the purposes of developing or enhancing a holistic conceptual base among educators and for investigating holistic attitudes pertaining to education. This paper merely speculates on some of the components necessary for providing educators with such a conceptual base. Since it does not present arguments for or against holistic education, a premise of this paper is that operationalizing holism for education is a desirable possiblity.

The course is intended for educators having little or no prior experience with holistic perspectives applied to pedagogy or for pedagogic materials. The content of this seminar, however, should broaden the conceptual base of educators already having some holistic perspective.

Works by several scientists have been selected as an entrance point to the study of a theoretical background of holism.[7] This is because physics, for example, provides illustrations both in familiar linear terms and in multidimensional (quantum) terms associated with holistic concepts. By using such illustrations a context is established within which the shift from linear to holistic thinking can be shown. Employing examples of holistic thinking taken from Western science also avoids more controversial sources as a way of grounding theoretical precepts behind holism (such as religious scriptures or

accounts by mystics and yogis).

Holistic theory derived from studying the evolution of sub-atomic physics (a subject that examines the fundamental "building blocks" of our universe) extends to "global education" and "world-mindedness," allowing a macrocosmic generalization of the same interdependence of systems which has been demonstrated in the microcosm. In this sense global education is a subset of holistic education.

Subject matter for global awareness, if presented by educators (or governmental advisors) who have not themselves comprehended and internalized the holistic point of view, may simply contribute, unwittingly or otherwise, to a "globalization of existing awareness" (or, stated another way, to the indoctrination of outmoded concepts on an even more grandiose scale) instead of helping others in actually becoming "more globally aware." This distinction is more than semantic quibbling; many examples already exist of the development of new tools—such as modern holistic education curricula—which have outpaced the development of a viable philosophical comprehension of their application to everyday realities.

When a curriculum (holistic or otherwise) is programmed for students on a computer, it is known as "software." In a classroom, however, curriculum materials are the hardware: the vehicle on which the program rides. The true "software"—the real programming—is the quality of the teacher's conceptual base manifested through the attitude and awareness with which he or she brings such material alive in the classroom. The implicit premise here is that the classrooms of educators who develop a holistic conceptual base are going to be more "alive" and thus more interesting to students.

The following course description suggests a general curriculum for teacher education. It is beyond the intended scope of this paper to establish

a detailed curriculum, to offer a formal plan for implementing it, or to propose who should teach it. (These are important questions, and a third paper in this series, "The Nature-Human Nature Curriculum," includes a specific proposal for formally implementing a detailed "Nature-Human Nature Curriculum" into our public schools to be taught by teachers trained in the orientation presented here.)[8]

II

"A Proposed Course for Educators" serves fundamentally to identify some of the necessary components for providing educators with a holistic perspective. In turn, if teachers were to establish such a holistic educational perspective in their own classrooms, we would go far towards enhancing the quality of our educational system (because it would be aligned with the holistic nature of reality) and towards addressing the overriding integral nature of reality—the Tao, in Eastern terms, in education. The essence of this proposed course is presented in the following six points:

--Holistic perspectives on education are based on philosophical assumptions that need to be identified. This course identifies and examines such assumptions and explores the philosophical bases of a holistic point of view. The course is interdisciplinary because holistic realities of life are "interdisciplinary." Holistic perspectives on education encompass ethnic and/or minority studies, ecological awareness, and global perspectives. The course is perhaps best subsumed under the academic discipline of "philosophy of education," but it is oriented to on-the-job realities. It is also teacher education. In the future, perhaps we will call this kind of course "educational psychology." It could also be called "integral education," "whole

systems education," "coordinate education," or "education for comprehensivity."

--"Holism" is essentially the theory that "whole entities," as fundamental components of reality, have an existence superordinate to the mere sum of their parts. Holistic is defined as emphasizing the organic or functional relation between parts and wholes. A workable definition of holistic education is, accordingly, education that emphasizes the functional relation between parts and wholes. As the title suggests, the course will examine how inseparable and intertwined, in practice, are education, psychology, philosophy, sociology, cultural anthropology, communications, counseling, political theory, physics (and virtually all other topics as topics). (Many of the theoretical concepts of holism--in the academic sense, in addition to one's intuitive sense--arise from twentieth-century discoveries in sub-atomic physics.) Implications of a holistic paradigm will be discussed.

--Obviously, teacher education and education in general are both concerned with the enhancement of one's "personal data base." In this course, however, the development of an integrated philosophical base is heavily emphasized, because only through a cohesive and authentic conceptual base can viable premises be identified. Thus, "holistic logic" is introduced to emphasize an examination of first premises, their underlying purposes and possible motivations as well as their implicit and explicit foundations. From perspectives that this course develops, comparative analyses of various contemporary and traditional educational philosophies are carried out. Various aspects of such philosophies are examined; analyses are conducted with respect to curriculum implications, pedagogical descriptions, and assumptions about human growth and development. Selected non-Western concepts of

educational philosophy are also explored.

—Holistic perspectives on education will be related to various topics or disciplines (for example, ecology, hydrology, economics, media, government, agriculture, health, interpersonal relationships, communication, and education itself) so that underlying and consistent holistic principles can be distinguished from, or contrasted to, various applications. For example, the holistic principle of "Spaceship Earth" and the Taoist (and holistic) principle of Yin/Yang have applications in a variety of domains. This course also examines topical trends and issues in education as they relate to holism, both from a practical viewpoint (their direct relationship to the classroom) and in the abstract. (An example of an educational issue consisting of both practical and abstract aspects might be how best to assist teachers in maintaining classroom control. Two alternative solutions—the relative merits of drawing up "performance contracts" with students as opposed to presenting subject matter in a more holistically integrated context—might, for example, be considered.)

—Certain strategic artifacts and "worldviews" from the work of Frances Moore Lappé, Barbara Marx Hubbard, R. Buckminster Fuller, Peter Russell, and others will be introduced. With the logic and artifacts presented, students can discover holistic certainties intuitively, without the need for a teacher's "interpretation" of holistic experiences. The use of the Fuller Dymaxion Projection is one example among many.[9] Through this cartographic projection, the world's entire land surface is viewable simultaneously on a flat map with no apparent distortion. The continents appear as one unbroken contour of land—one large island in a large ocean. Studying this remarkable map is certain to provoke some subjective awareness of holism.

—The course is designed to complement other education courses and, due

to the inherent nature of the material, it should enhance the participants' sense of closure as relates to virtually all more specialized areas. As prospective or practicing teachers become familiar with these and other holistic perspectives, the teachers examine classroom techniques to aid others' understanding of these materials.

III

In recent years many well-publicized articles and studies have appeared concerning the urgent state of education in the U.S. The complexities of, and variables encompassed by, the perceived problems are reflected in the diversity of the many varying diagnoses and proposed solutions. Curriculum reform (for example "back to basics"), the quality of teacher education and certification, teacher compensation, and questions of student motivation and discipline are among the many "most important" areas proposed for reforms.

The above material, too, makes an implied statement about the direction we must take in our thinking about education, in this case, of teachers. Given the ongoing paradigm shift in the sciences (they are becoming more attuned to holistic realities)[10] we in education must also update our answer to the question "What constitutes being educated?" as we approach the year 2000. This underlying question, and part of my answer to it, are also implicit in this paper.

Naturally, there is no broad consensus about which areas most urgently require attention. Debate over matters such as curriculum content, the separation of religion and public education, the quality of teacher education and the relative desirability of a voucher system for private education can be traced back to Colonial times, so I am not counting on the speedy or permanent resolution of these or other pressing educational issues. In the meantime,

however, something can still be done to help teachers and students perceive the world comprehensively.

It might be considered utopian or naïve to imagine that this particular course will ever be taught systematically to educators on a large scale, because it is just too "impractical." But, it is already clear to many that we must think and act comprehensively (or, stated another way, holistically) regarding educational planning, and, if writers such as Buckminster Fuller are heeded, that we must do so both quickly and on a much larger scale than previously imagined. If this course is considered practical, then, so much the better. If not, so be it, but it at least addresses itself to the question of whether and to what extent we may hope to address the TAO in education.

## Notes

[1] See Gateless Gate (1979), p. xviii.

[2] Blofeld (1973), p. 15.

[3] Harner (1980) p. xiii and 175.

[4] Blofeld (1978), p. 19-21; Blofeld (1973), p. 118 Ch. 6.

[5] Harner (1980), p. 51.

[6] Paper by Alex Gerber, Jr. cited below.

[7] This refers to the works by Bohm, Capra, Fuller, Kuhn, Thomas, Weil, and Wolf cited below.

[8] Unpublished manuscript © 1984 Alex Gerber, Jr.

[9] Fuller (1981), p. 163-165.

[10] Described in the first paper in this series by Alex Gerber, Jr. cited below. Also see Capra (1982).

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